Riddles Formed on the Basis of Imperative and Interrogative Sentences in English

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Abstract. Riddles are a long-lived folklore genre in English, used in oral exchange as short puzzles that demand an answer. Because the genre is built around a prompt–solution pair, riddle language is closely tied to sentence types that ask for information or direct the addressee. This article examines English riddles from a syntactic and pragmatic perspective, focusing on interrogative and imperative constructions. It argues that interrogatives—especially wh-questions with *what* and *who*—provide the default grammatical frame for riddling, while many formally non-interrogative prompts (declaratives, fragments, couplets) are interpreted as questions due to performance conventions and frequent "tag" questions such as What am I? Special attention is paid to productive templates (*What is/has/can…?*), contrastive structures with but and other privative markers (*no, never, without*), and the marked but expressive role of imperatives, which often function as instructions that increase audience involvement (e.g., "Take away my first letter…"). The analysis shows that riddle syntax is best understood as a set of conventional patterns optimized for dialogic performance and for guiding the solver's inferential search.

Keywords: riddles; interrogatives; imperatives; wh-pronouns; syntax; pragmatics; folklore performance

1. Introduction

A riddle can be defined as an intentionally enigmatic question or statement that requires a thoughtful (often witty) solution. Riddles are historically important in English, from early poetic collections to everyday oral and digital practices. Yet riddles are not only "semantic puzzles"; they are conventionalized speech events. Historically, English riddles span multiple registers: literary verse riddles, short oral riddles used in family or classroom settings, and contemporary written riddles circulating online. Across these contexts, the genre's core remains stable: the prompt is intentionally indirect and the answer is treated as a success condition of the event. This stability

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makes riddles a useful object for syntactic study, because conventional genres tend to develop preferred grammatical frames that are easy to recognize and to perform.

As folklore research emphasizes, riddles exist in performance: a riddle is posed to someone, in a situation where an answer is expected and evaluated. This functional requirement has consequences for grammar. English provides a clear set of clause types associated with questioning and directing—interrogatives and imperatives—and riddles regularly exploit both.

The purpose of this article is to describe how English riddles are formed on the basis of interrogative and imperative sentences and to explain why interrogatives dominate while imperatives are comparatively limited. The analysis draws on structural and performance-based definitions of riddles and on linguistic accounts that treat riddles as patterned pragmatic objects. Recent work on linguocultural and linguocognitive features is used to connect syntactic form with cultural knowledge and processing.

2. Riddles as dialogic prompts

Riddling is inherently dialogic because the genre presupposes two roles: a poser and a solver. The riddle prompt is only "completed" when it is paired with an answer, even if the answer is delayed, contested, or humorous. Burns describes riddling as an "occasion to act": participants recognize that the riddle creates an "answer slot," and the solver's response is socially expected. Kaivola-Bregenhøj develops this performance view by showing how riddle form and delivery are shaped by the interactional setting.

This dialogic design helps explain why question syntax is so prominent. Even when the riddle text is not an interrogative clause on the surface, the social frame makes it function as a question. The widespread riddle tag What am I? is therefore more than a stylistic ending: it explicitly marks the transition from clue-giving to answer-giving and aligns the prompt with the genre's turn-taking rules.

3. Riddle structure and the role of contradiction

Many riddles are designed around controlled contradiction. Georges and Dundes propose that riddles often contain a "positive element" (a descriptive clue) and a "negative element" that blocks the literal interpretation. English riddles regularly realize this logic through syntax: a property is stated and then denied in the same prompt. Pepicello and Green link this to linguistic ambiguity and selection restrictions, while Dienhart emphasizes the pragmatic effect: the listener is guided toward an interpretation, then forced to revise it.

These ideas clarify why certain constructions are so productive in English riddles, especially contrastive coordination (but) and privative markers (no, never, without, cannot). Such forms make the puzzle memorable and, at the same time, narrow down the space of plausible solutions.

4. Data and method

The analysis is qualitative and pattern-based. Rather than building a closed corpus, it examines widely attested English riddle prompts and groups them by surface clause type (interrogative vs imperative) and by recurring templates (e.g., What has X but cannot Y?). This approach follows riddle scholarship that treats the genre as conventional and formulaic in performance and therefore suited to template-level description. Examples are used as representative instantiations of patterns that recur across oral and written collections.

5. Interrogatives as the default riddle frame

5.1. What-questions and copular templates

The most productive English riddle pattern is the wh-interrogative headed by what:

- *What is always in bed but never sleeps?* (A river)

- *What has a face but no head?* (A clock)

- *What is always coming, but never arrives?* (Tomorrow)

These are standard English wh-questions: what is fronted, and the copula or auxiliary follows it (*What is…, What has…, What can…*). Their success in riddling is partly grammatical: what can target virtually any referent (objects, substances, events, abstractions), so it works as a flexible placeholder for the hidden answer. It is also performative: *What is/has…* offers a short, stable rhythm that is easy to remember and recite.

5.2. What-questions beyond *be*: *have* and modal frames

While copular *What is…* is common, riddles also heavily use have and modal auxiliaries:

- *What has roots as nobody sees, is taller than trees, up, up it goes and yet never grows?* (A mountain)

- *What can you break without hitting or dropping it?* (A promise)

- *What can be heard and caught but never seen?* (A remark)

Syntactically, these frames matter because they control what remains unspecified. In *What has…*, the unknown referent is the subject that possesses salient parts (teeth, face, neck). In *What can…*, **can** shifts attention from stable description to possibility and constraint: it invites the solver to consider unusual affordances and to search for a non-literal domain where the described action makes sense.

5.3. Who-questions and personification

Who-questions appear most often when the riddle encourages a human reading:

- *The little old woman has twelve children… Who is she?* (A year)

- *Who is that with a neck and no head, two arms and no hands?* (A shirt)

By selecting who, the riddle invites the listener to search in the "human" domain, and then the answer reveals metaphorical mapping (months as children; sleeves as arms). This is a practical example of the positive–negative structure: cues point to an animate category, but other cues force reinterpretation.

5.4. Where and when: location and condition

Interrogative adverbs also form classic riddle frames:

- *Where can you find roads without cars…?* (On a map)

- *When is a door not a door?* (When it's ajar)

Such riddles show that the genre can target not only entities but also situations. In addition, some English riddles use yes/no question formats (e.g., *Is it…?*, *Can you…?*), especially in conversational riddling: they invite immediate guesses and follow-up questions and naturally hand the next turn to the solver.

6. "Hidden questions": prompts that are not interrogatives in form

Despite the dominance of interrogatives, many riddles are not fully interrogative on the surface. They may be declaratives or poetic couplets followed by a tag question:

- *Whether I'm coming or whether I'm going, I sing a song when I'm blowing. What am I?* (The wind)

- *Never planted, still it grows… Now who knows?* (Hair)

Here the descriptive lines are declarative; the interrogative force is supplied by the performance context and/or the final tag. This supports the pragmatic view that riddles are recognized as questions because the riddling event creates an answer slot, not because every line has interrogative morphology.

In other words, interrogativity is a genre property that can be distributed across discourse, not only encoded in a single clause. In live riddling, prosody is crucial: a declarative clause can be delivered with rising question intonation, and the solver treats it as a question even without wh-fronting. Poetic riddles also use parallelism and rhyme to package multiple clues into a single "turn," after which an explicit question (or simply a pause) signals that an answer is expected.

7. Contrastive syntax: *but, without, never*

One of the strongest grammatical signatures of English riddles is contrastive and privative phrasing:

- *What has teeth, but can't chew?*

- *What has two hands and a face, but no arms or legs?*

- *What comes down, but never goes up?*

The conjunction but is structurally efficient: it creates an expectation and then cancels it. In Georges and Dundes' terms, the second conjunct frequently acts as the "negative element." Privative markers (*no, never, without, cannot*) further sharpen the contradiction, blocking literal categorization while keeping the clue vivid.

English riddles also exploit paired oppositions such as *falls/breaks* and *breaks/falls*:

- *What falls but never breaks? What breaks but never falls?* (Night and day)

These paired clauses work like a mini-dialogue inside the riddle: the solver compares two complementary constraints and searches for abstract processes rather than ordinary objects.

8. Imperative-based riddles: limited but revealing

8.1. Why imperatives are marked

Compared with interrogatives, imperatives are less common as primary riddle prompts. This matches their core speech-act function: imperatives typically request action, while riddles request an answer. Since answer-seeking is central to riddling performance, interrogatives naturally dominate.

However, imperatives do occur, and they tend to appear in two contexts: (a) "scripted interaction" with the hidden object and (b) metalinguistic wordplay where the solver is instructed to perform an operation.

8.2. Scripted interaction and vivid hypotheticals

- *Give me food and I will live; give me water and I will die. What am I?* (Fire)

- *Knock on me, and do come in… hold out your hand to me.* (A door)

These prompts begin with directives (*Give…, Knock…*), but their pragmatic aim is not literal compliance. The imperative mood dramatizes a hypothetical scenario and makes the clue feel like direct address. In cognitive terms, it encourages the solver to imagine actions and their consequences, guiding interpretation.

Importantly, many such riddles still end with What am I?—a sign that the genre prefers explicit interrogative closure even when clue-giving is imperative. Imperatives in riddles can also appear

in sequences that mimic polite instruction (*Please don't forget…*), which softens directive force and makes the text sound like an object "speaking" to the listener—again reinforcing personification.

A further subtype is the "invitation imperative," where the riddle seems to invite the solver into an activity rather than command them, as in *Come and read me* (Book). In such cases, the imperative contributes to genre playfulness: the riddle performs friendliness while hiding its answer.

8.3. Imperatives for linguistic manipulation

Imperatives are especially functional in wordplay riddles where the object is a word:

- *Take away my first letter; take away my second letter; take away all my letters, and I would remain the same.*

- *A word I know, six letters it contains. Subtract just one, and twelve is what remains.* (Dozens)

Here the imperative is genuinely instructional: it tells the solver what operation to perform. This aligns with typological distinctions between descriptive riddles and witty/punning questions and with modern typology work that classifies riddle types by how they encode the "path" to solution.

9. Morphological cues that support riddle syntax

Across both interrogative and imperative riddles, certain morphological choices recur:

- Person and deixis: *I/me/my* and *you* encourage personification and conversational stance, promoting metaphor and misdirection.

- Modals: *can* and *will* appear frequently (*What can…*, *I will…*), framing ability, possibility, and consequence.

- Generic present: *What has…*, *What is…* presents clues as timeless "definitions," suitable for repeated performance.

- Negation: *no/never/cannot* are central in building contradiction and narrowing interpretation.

- Determiners and quantifiers: *always, never, all, many, no one* signal genericity and create absoluteness (*always coming, never arrives*).

- Relative and comparative structures: patterns like *as nobody sees* or *taller than trees* compress multiple properties into compact syntax, enabling dense clue-packing within a short turn.

10. Interrogatives, culture, and processing

Syntactic templates persist in riddling because they are learnable and reusable. Linguocultural studies show that English riddles encode cultural frames and shared associations; the grammatical template provides a stable shell into which culturally meaningful clues can be inserted. Linguocognitive work argues that riddles guide processing through linguistic form: repeated frames, parallelism, and contradiction help the listener allocate attention and test hypotheses. From this viewpoint, interrogative templates such as *What has… but cannot…* are not merely grammatical options; they are cognitive tools that package misdirection predictably. Imperative patterns, when they occur, do the same by turning the solver into an imagined participant in the described action.

11. Conclusion

A syntactic study of English riddles confirms that the genre is strongly question-oriented, but not limited to interrogatives as a clause type. Interrogatives—especially *what-* and *who-* questions— offer the most productive and recognizable riddle frames because they match the genre's dialogic aim: eliciting an answer. At the same time, many riddles are only "interrogative" at the level of discourse, relying on performance conventions and tag questions (*What am I?*) to create an answer slot. Imperatives are comparatively restricted, yet they are linguistically revealing: they increase involvement by scripting imagined actions and by instructing metalinguistic operations in wordplay riddles. Overall, riddle syntax emerges as a set of conventional patterns optimized for oral interaction, memorable contradiction, and guided inference—an intersection of grammar, pragmatics, and folklore performance.

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